Building Tillegra Dam in the Hunter: Too costly, too risky, too much to lose

The proposed area of the Tillegra Dam in the Hunter is the size of Sydney Harbour.

by Bev Smiles
Upper Hunter

In November 2006, Morris Iemma announced that a mega dam the size of Sydney Harbour would be built on the Williams River in the Hunter Valley.

The Tillegra Dam was announced without consultation or notice, in the same week that Milton Orkopolous was arrested. Hunter Water Corporation's own documents released between 2003 and 2006 ranked Tillegra Dam as the second worst water supply option for the region.

Tillegra Dam will inundate 21 square kilometers of precious riverine environment along the Williams River, one of the few rivers in the Hunter Valley not affected by coal mining. Native species to be impacted include platypus, a diversity of fish species, five species of mussels, freshwater crayfish, long-necked turtles, and a rare stand of river oaks covering 2 hectares.

The proposed dam will flood over 3,000 hectares of irreplaceable agricultural land and displace 90 farming families. Economic losses to Dungog Shire are estimated at $10 million per annum.

Large dams have been shown to produce massive emissions of greenhouse gasses from rotting vegetation and inundated land.

The Save the Williams Coalition was formed in April 2008 made up of national, state and local environment groups and local community groups, supported by The Greens.

The initial justification for the Tillegra Dam was to supply the Central Coast and support growth in the Lower Hunter. Now the spin is a focus on 'drought proofing' the region.

Despite the worst drought on record in NSW, Hunter Water's supply levels have remained high. Even at the end of this drought Hunter Water customers had no water restrictions and there was excess water available to supply the Central Coast.

Water security in the Lower Hunter and Central Coast can be maintained without building new dams. Hunter Water Corporation recognised this in 2003 when it stated that "building a new dam at Tillegra would be far less cost effective than many demand management and water conservation initiatives".

Providing recycled water for outdoor and other non-drinking purposes in new developments is cost effective and can reduce drinking water use in households by up to 70%. Department of Environment and Climate Change figures show domestic water mains usage can be reduced by 40-50% by installation of rainwater tanks.

Hunter Water has one of the lowest uptakes of rainwater tank subsidies in the country and downplays the value of rainwater harvesting.

Water users of the lower Hunter and the Central Coast will have to foot the enormous bill for this unnecessary dam, with water bills likely to rise by 30 to 100%.

The current estimated cost of $300 million is based on outdated geological data from the 1950s. It is an active earthquake area, and geological instability could blow out the final cost to a billion dollars. The proposed inundation area is known to be covered by unstable fault lines, including along the entire eastern rim and in immediate proximity to the proposed dam wall.

Meteorological studies are showing that North East NSW down to the Lower Hunter will receive increased rainfall due to climate change. The June 2007 'Pasha Bulker' event is a case in point.

The Hunter does not need the Tillegra Dam. It is a costly decision devastating the environment and the community – another white elephant of the Iemma Government. ■

For more-information:
www.notillegradam.com